

Feds mulled H1N1 shots for pigs after Alberta farm outbreak: Document

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OTTAWA — Should Porky Pig get a swine-flu shot?

That's a question Canada's food-safety watchdog pondered this spring after an Alberta hog farmer's herd caught the H1N1 virus, a newly released document shows.

An internal report from the Canadian Food Inspection Agency suggests officials considered sticking pigs with a special swine-flu needle to stop the virus from spreading through herds.

"Vaccination can be a useful tool for control and eradication of emerging diseases as an alternative to large-scale slaughter and disposal of 'at risk' animals," the report says.

The report was sent to the agency's top veterinary officer and its president April 25 — four days after the Alberta pigs started showing flu-like symptoms.

The Canadian Press obtained the document under the Access to Information Act.

Pigs can catch flu viruses from infected pigs and people, mostly from coughing and sneezing. But there's no proof people can get the H1N1 virus from pigs or eating pork.

Little was known about the novel strain of the H1N1 virus as the food-inspection agency mulled swine-flu shots for pigs.

The outbreak at the farm near Rocky Mountain House, Alta., was the first-ever report of the new virus in pigs, and the source of the infection remains a mystery.

Health officials speculated a sick carpenter who had just returned from Mexico — thought to be the epicenter of the H1N1 outbreak — passed the virus on to the pigs.

But tests later ruled out the carpenter as the culprit.

The food-inspection agency held conference calls with animal-health experts this spring at the height of the Alberta farm incident.

At the time, agency officials thought vaccinating pigs might help stop the spread of the virus, said Cate Dewey, who teaches swine health management and epidemiology at the University of Guelph and was on some of the calls.

"That was some of the early discussion: 'My goodness, if pigs are going to be a source of infection for people, we'd better vaccinate pigs so that we don't have this huge problem with people,'" Dewey said.

There was talk of making a special H1N1 vaccine for pigs, she added. But those plans were dropped when health officials found pigs weren't making people sick.

"Since we've seen what happens with the pigs not transmitting it to people ... it was decided it wasn't a high enough risk to warrant the money that it would cost," Dewey said.

Jim Clark, national manager of disease control for the food-inspection agency, said it's up to drug companies to decide whether to make a special H1N1 vaccine for pigs.

"Without having a clear picture from a commercial perspective of how much uptake there would be by the swine producers of any given country to use this vaccine, I think there's a hesitancy on the part of the pharmaceutical companies to actually go ahead and provide that vaccine or develop it," he said.

Vaccinating pigs against flu viruses is common. Some U.S. drug companies make flu vaccines for pigs that are licensed in Canada, which are sort of like seasonal flu shots for pigs.

The agency's report also cites industry statistics showing half of Canadian sows are vaccinated against various flu viruses.

The document says pigs may be "highly vulnerable" to bird and human strains of flu viruses, especially if a new strain infects the herd.

But the report also found vaccinating pigs isn't always the best way to stop the virus from spreading through a herd.

That's partly because it takes pigs a few days to build up immunity to the virus after they get the shot.

"Since time is required to develop optimal immunity, large scale vaccination on infected premises is not practical," the report says.

Pigs that get the flu shot may not be fully immune to the virus, it adds. That means some pigs that don't look sick may in fact be spreading the virus to other pigs.

Vaccinated pigs' immune systems produce antibodies that look like the antibodies found in infected pigs, the report says, so it can be tough to tell them apart.

Not being able to tell sick pigs from healthy ones sealed the Alberta herd's fate. The hog farmer ended up culling his whole herd of 3,000 pigs when he couldn't sell them.